Why Do People Become Academics? A personal, reflective, account linking higher education & community development

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Abstract

Higher education is in a state of flux. With austerity challenging assumptions of a comfortable career path for academics. Many academics report pressure to perform across research and teaching. In this article the author addresses two questions – why do people become academics? And how, if at all, are university teaching, and community development connected? The research explored includes personal reflection; views on academic teaching from colleagues, plus those from academics at a number of UK universities.

Amongst the findings is the fact that a number of responding UK academics expressed the view that they had stepped onto a 'conveyor belt' that led from positive undergraduate experience, eventually to an academic post. The findings also present a strong case for alignment and mutual reinforcement of higher education teaching and approaches to community engagement. The one nurtures the other.

In this article my aim is to understand why academics in the 21st century choose their profession. During the 1970s I was lucky enough to be taught by the late-Professor Gerald Wibberley at London University. 'Wibb', as he was affectionately known, was an inspiring practical academic, who seemed to enjoy teaching and research. If he were alive today, we would say he was steeped in understanding and acting to promote sustainability. In this he was years ahead of his time; and like the best academics he didn't dodge difficult questions, and argued using evidence. Professor Wibberley had been strongly involved in developing UK agricultural policy for Government, but underwent a 'conversion'; in that he became vocal about the ills of technologically-driven farming – destruction of wildlife, decimation of jobs on the land and pollution.

To illustrate his academic fearlessness, I remember, as an undergraduate, being captivated by his account of a run-in with the National Farmers' Union. At their annual conference he warned, 'if you don't behave, and mend your damaging practices, well…. think yourself lucky we live in a democracy because - if we became

a dictatorship - they could take you outside, put you against a wall and shoot the lot of you'! He concluded with relish that as a result the audience had lined up to lynch him! His obituary in the *Independent* newspaper (Clayton, 1993) read: 'His gift for public speaking was memorable…But he was at his most eloquent when gently berating a hostile audience for not seeing the folly of their views.'

My journey to higher education via community development

I started by reflecting on why I became an academic working on aspects of community development, and, over time have been increasingly struck by the connections with university teaching. This led me to explore both pedagogic and community engagement literature, plus primary research in the form of colleague testimonies, from those at my own and other UK universities. My original research sought to compare and contrast personal and colleague insights with what the literature sets down.

Bandura (1998: 95) believed 'fortuitous events set in motion constellations of influences that change the course of lives'. In my case, as primarily a teacher in higher education, my outlook and approach have been stamped by the fortuity of exposure to such a memorable mentor as Gerald Wibberley. My focus in this article is on academic teachers, although inevitably I will stray into the linked areas of research, consultancy and (community) service.

Professor Iain Hay contends, 'there are new and more strident expectations to teach more students better; to more fully engage with professional and social communities; to publish high-quality books and papers, and more of them; to get more grant money; and to otherwise develop and maintain ceaselessly a stellar career' (2017: 9). He goes on to count the cost of such pressures, in terms of 'loneliness, divorce, stress, unhappiness, ill health and career abandonment' (*ibid*: 9). Given these stresses, strains and pitfalls, why do people enter the academy or end up there?

My route to academia spans the years 1979 – 2017. Up to 1993 I held a series of 'lone' ranger' project officer jobs: working with rural communities in Devon and Northumberland to facilitate community engagement. My practice is reflected in continuing involvement in community-led plans as a resident activist, trainer and examiner for those undertaking such *Neighbourhood Plans*; also as a volunteer Board member of a regeneration company operating to improve the area surrounding a campus of the University of Gloucestershire.

Community development and higher education teaching are connected as they share many principles and practices, including co-production and partnership; active participation; facilitation and empowerment. There are strong links between key theoreticians in both 'camps': The Brazilian writer and practitioner Paulo Freire, as one example, saw education as capable of subjugating or liberating both individuals and communities. Similarly, Jenny Moon (2009) at Bournemouth University emphasises the value of 'academic assertiveness' whereby students question received wisdom and endeavour to become autonomous learners. This chimes with

work by North American academic, Albert Bandura (1982: 754) whereby social systems, such as education, that 'cultivate generative competencies, provide aidful resources, and allow ample room for self-directedness increase the chances that people will realize what they wish to become.'

The above strands additionally link in terms of my own past and present jobs: such as teaching-action research-consultancy at the Universities of Newcastle, West of England & Gloucestershire; plus a series of External Examinerships. So there is intermingling and mutual nurturing between my practice, teaching and learning. I think of this journey into academia as a meeting of rivers; like the White and Blue Nile joining at Khartoum, thereby producing intermixing and overlap. My career of 38 years, leads me to believe that higher education is to community development as meat is to drink. Each complements the other and can enable a virtuous circle of individual and collective progress.

Beresford and Croft (1993: 51) argue 'for people to have an effective say within their communities they must have the personal resources and skills to do so.' One route to finding such capabilities can come through a university or college education. The academic and practitioner, Margaret Ledwith (2005), points to a very clear meeting point in that those working with communities can be critical educators.

Definitions of the two terms more than hint at their intimacy: The key purpose of community development is to enable 'people to work collectively to bring about positive social change' (National Occupational Standards in Community Development Work, 2015). The NOS also emphasise people working together to improve 'the quality of their own lives, the communities in which they live, and societies of which they are a part.' (2015: 5); whilst 'higher education should be concerned with preparing students - ethically and intellectually - for active global citizenship' (Bourn et al, 2006: back page). Both therefore highlight an active social process intended to generate constructive change; although it could be argued that a difference arises from the collective approach of community development; as opposed to an individual emphasis of higher education; not least since a university education carries a direct tuition fee payable by each student in various countries including the United States and much of the UK. Paulo Freire (cited in Ledwith, 2005: 69) – connects the individual to the whole, education to community development: so that 'the personal is understood as political'.

Individual change can drive societal transformation. A point reinforced by Martin Luther King Jnr. who argued as long ago as the 1960s that saving 'our world from pending doom will come, not through the complacent adjustment of the conforming majority, but through the creative maladjustment of a nonconforming minority' (King, 1963: 27-28). Etienne Wenger (Wenger-Trayner online) describes 'communities of practice' as groups of people who 'share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.' This could equally apply to 'community development'. The National Occupational Standards (2015: 6) for community development stress 'working and learning together'…. partnerships that from an educational stance might be termed co-

production of knowledge and learning; similarly, 'reflective practice' (ibid, 2015: 15) can be seen as intrinsic to both higher education and community-based work.

Education is widely accepted as fundamental to community and individual empowerment. In the United Kingdom the Government's *2011 Localism Act* passed 'significant new rights direct to communities and individuals, making it easier for them to get things done and achieve their ambitions for the place where they live.' (Communities and Local Government, 2011: 8). Similarly, Central Government's *Communities in Control* 2008 White Paper (Communities and Local Government: 25) advocated 'active citizenship education' across England in order to seize the opportunities offered through delegated powers. That said, it should be noted that in a highly centralised state such as the United Kingdom, power is given out from the top downwards. Meaning that the spirit of community development is constrained, and limited by whatever the state is willing to cede to more localised stakeholders.

Wright (cited in Buller and Wright, 1990:45) noted the origins of this emphasis on education for community development in the context of British colonial administration in Africa during the 1940s, where ' community development officers were to work at village level…They set up literacy classes, or some means to bring a group together….' One Colonial Office 'Memorandum on Education in Tropical Africa' (quoted by Brokensha and Hodge, 1969:27-8) specifically promoted education 'of the people in the management of their own affairs and the inculcation of the ideals of citizenship and service'. It should be noted, however, that any discussion of colonial use of community development raises questions about motivation. For pluralists, education can be seen as empowering and levelling; whilst structuralists view such ventures as 'window dressing' or tokenistic, in that education and development are circumscribed, whilst keeping a people pliant to ensure that civil unrest does not erupt.

Robert Chambers (in Warburton 1998: 121) argued that people's capacity to do things can be enhanced 'through learning, practice, training and education', leading to greater well-being. As an adjunct Francis and Henderson (1992: 75) observed that it is essential for a community development worker 'to support local people, and sometimes this should take the form of education and training.' Margaret Ledwith (2005: 32) contends that research 'is integral to community development praxis[1]; it is the way in which practice is kept relevant to the changing social and political context'. This claim mirrors a long-running conversation among academics, that their teaching should be informed by up to date research.

Ledwith (2005 quoting Hustedde and King 2002: 34) refers to an 'increasing interest in the emotional life of communities as a neglected aspect of community development.' This in turn echoes emphasis in higher education on 'emotional intelligence' – the importance of understanding the learners' state of mind and behaviour in order to help them learn effectively. There is recognition that the

[1] Praxis – 'a unity of theory and practice' Ledwith (2005: 1) or the 'synthesis of *action* and *reflection*' (*Ibid*: 41)

quality of human relationships has a direct bearing on the impact of learning. And there is also a striking crossover in the *language* of education and community development; using terms such as 'empowerment', 'inclusion', 'facilitation and sharing 'good practice', to name but a few. So it is that the UK Government seeks 'empowerment…. through every practical means' (Communities and Local Government 2008: 2). While in higher education 'empowerment and student autonomy correlate strongly with self-confidence and...this needs to be enhanced through the acquisition of enabling skills' (Hughes, 1998: 229).

According to Ledwith (2005: 53), Freire believed that 'education can never be neutral: its political function is to liberate or domesticate. In other words, the process of education either creates critical, autonomous thinkers or it renders people passive and unquestioning'. This in turn ties in with my observation (Derounian, 1998: 43) that there are 'winners and losers' as a result of community development since it is not a neutral undertaking. Freire's words are supported by Botes and van Rensburg (2000), who argue that community development can actually disempower and reinforce inequalities ('domesticate') rather than release.

Ken Bain, from New York University, observes that conventional teaching 'is something that instructors do to students' (2004: 48); thus echoing the idea of 'top down' development work, so that what an authority considers good for people is implemented. Friere (1985: 122) was blunt and contended that 'washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral.' In his work, *Pedagogy of Freedom* he deduced that the 'educator with a democratic vision or posture cannot avoid in his teaching praxis insisting on the critical capacity, curiosity, and autonomy of the learner' Friere (2001: 13). This connects with Moon's research (2008: 88) that a student should develop 'psychological and emotional orientations and behaviours that enables a learner to manage the challenges to the self in progressing in learning and critical thinking as well in general social situations….'

'Facilitation' is therefore a common feature of both higher education and community development – helping individuals to help themselves and – hopefully – in the process, others. Furthermore, it is simple and appropriate to adapt Freire's words to read: The community developer 'with a democratic vision or posture cannot avoid in his...praxis insisting on the critical capacity, curiosity, and autonomy of the learner.' Both community development and learning can be viewed as encouraging people to extraordinarily re-experience the ordinary (Shor, 1992). This also picks up on DeLind and Link's (2004: 127) contention that 'daily life is not a backdrop to education, but education itself…students need to carefully and critically examine what exists under their feet and outside their front (and back) doors.'

To illustrate another substantial crossover between higher education and community development, see if you can determine what the author is referring to in the following: 'Critical reflection on practice is a requirement of the relationship between theory and practice. Otherwise theory becomes simply 'blah, blah, blah,' and practice, pure activism.' Freire (2001:30) is referring to education, but the same

could be said of community-based work. Why, what, how and when are we acting with communities? Only reflection can keep aims, methods, results, recommendations and adjustments in sight; and offer the prospect of securing the integrity of an undertaking. This links to Schön's idea of *reflection-in-action*; that is reviewing something while it can make a difference rather than looking back at how to change things for the future. He explains that when 'someone reflects-in-action, he becomes a researcher in the practice context' (1983: 68).

In his manual on *Mobilizing Local Communities* (1994: 147) in Sweden, the academic Alf Ronnby argues that 'development of human resources is possibly the most important condition for local economic development', through for example customised training and education. And a much earlier UK pilot project that encouraged *Doing by Learning* (Scott et al, 1989: 94) concluded, 'the combination of adult education and rural community development can be an attractive and effective catalyst to local community action.'

Whether community development or higher education, the following captures the aspirations of both: former US President Barack Obama worked as a community organiser in 1980s Chicago and insisted – according to a colleague - on 'staying in the background while he empowered us' (Walsh, 2007 online) - something akin to the university teacher as learning facilitator. In his acceptance speech at the Democratic Convention**,** 2008, Obama rolled the two concepts together: 'we will keep our promise to every young American - if you commit to serve your community or your country, we will make sure you can afford a college education.' This sentiment echoes the Scandinavian notion of a social contract.

A view from colleagues as to why they became academics

Having set down a personal reflection on why I became an academic and the natural progression afforded by the intertwining and synergy of community development and HE teaching, I extended this conversation to colleagues in my School of Natural and Social Sciences. Of 34 teaching lecturers approached, I received answers from 17 (50%). Nine were women (53%), and 8 (47%), men. Just 3 were natural scientists (18%) – 1 biologist, 1 bioscientist and 1 environmental scientist; whilst 14 (82%) were social scientists: 4 criminologists, 1 lecturer in policing; 8 psychologists, and a lone sociologist. They spanned early career academics to those who have been teaching in universities for over 25 years. The 17 respondents were predominantly teaching academics: 2 Lecturers (12%); 13 Senior Lecturers (76%) and 1 Principal Lecturer (6%); and as an indicator of research status, 1 Reader (6%). The following findings are therefore exploratory and illustrative, and do not claim to be representative.

Three colleagues said they had come to the academy 'by accident' (respondents A, B & M). In the case of B, she 'accidentally discovered I enjoy and am quite decent at teaching'. C & D did not recognise themselves as academics, but rather practitioners who now found themselves teaching adults. C elaborated his status by writing 'I became an 'academic' because I am passionate about my subject…Being in academia allows me to share my passion with others.' Similarly, D commented that if she was

an academic 'then I've fallen into working with students because I love to see people growing and learning'; P stated this as well. M highlighted a 'conveyer belt' whereby she enjoyed her undergraduate studies, 'so stayed on to do a masters, I really enjoyed that so decided to be a research assistant, I really enjoyed that so decided to do a PhD, which I also really enjoyed so I decided to become a lecturer.' O & R echoed this pattern.

Another eight colleagues – E, F, G, H, I, P, Q & R identified the primacy of 'push' factors rather than the pull of an academic life: E because he 'was tired of being a student'; and F because she 'wanted out of the prison service'. For G it was 'about flexibility in terms of what I could do and how I could do it. I came into academia from a research post in industry where you clock on and off, and your research area can be declared, 'non-viable' overnight. With the birth of my daughter, the flexible (but longer!) hours in academia were a bonus. Combined with the ability to take control of one's own research it seemed like a good idea.' Similarly, H finished 'an MSc in Work Design and Ergonomics realized I didn't want to work for industry. Failed to get into the civil service graduate schemes, didn't make it onto a BBC graduate scheme and looking for another broadly public service. Taught for a year at FE and decided HE would be better.' Participant I 'didn't want to be a weekend dad away all week in a fancy hotel delivering organizational change, training or assessment centres anymore.' Q cited increased bureaucracy in her civil service position as the push towards a lecturing post.

'For the joy it' is articulated by respondent J. And K & L develop the same theme, focusing on 'moments of 'flow' when it all fits into place and you are making new connections and suddenly you see the world in a new, exciting way. This can happen in the classroom, when reading, writing or talking with others, in a whole range of academic contexts. It's even more exciting when you can do this with students and I've learnt a lot from them over the years.' M believes that 'constantly learning something new and striving to be better makes me content and happy.' I bridges from 'overall I just love teaching', to 'helping the next generation get brilliant jobs.' P extends this to say 'I think I am here because I love the combination of teaching and inspiring students, together with the freedom and support to undertake research that I'm really interested in.' These comments tie in with the *Times Higher Education* 2016 Workplace Survey results, in which 77% of academics expressed satisfaction with their jobs (Grove, 2016: online).

J articulates a strong urge to 'help bring learning and broaden minds and horizons…Increase the opportunities for people from deprived areas who dare aspire – help change the status quo' (also voiced by B and K – 'to make the world a better place'). Finally, B referred back to 'strong messages around education and service from my upbringing'. Likewise, O noted his 'dad was a lecturer so I always saw the value in HE'. Furthermore, B noted the importance of support and challenge from key people convinced that she could become a successful lecturer.

I then broadened the sample by seeking returns from staff listed on a JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee) UK External Examiner's electronic forum. This

platform shares information and vacancies amongst staff that are, or seek to be, external examiners for HE teaching programmes. The justification for this approach was that such an audience would (hopefully) be innately concerned with, or predisposed towards, teaching quality and how to improve it in higher education. The electronic, moderated, circulation enabled me to reach colleagues easily, directly and anonymously; and for them to reply likewise.

In the event, I received 10 separate replies from UK academics. 4 were from women (40%), and 6 (60%), from men. The majority were social scientists, with just 1 natural sciences respondent (a specialist in water resources) –

Communications' Systems	Computing	Design History	Digital Transformation	
English Literature	Garden Design	Social Work	Water	Resources Management

The 10 respondents were: 3 Readers (30%), 2 Senior Lecturers (20%); 1 Lecturer (10%), plus 2 Professors (20%) and an Associate Director, and Faculty Head of Quality and Practice (20%). One was aged 30-39 (10%); two 40-49 (20%); three were 50-59 years old (30%); and 4 aged 60-69 (40%). They ranged from early career academics (5 years at an HE institution), to those employed for over 40 years in HE:

Time as an academic:

1-9 years	10-19	20-29	30+
Two (20%)	Five (50%)	One (10%)	Two (20%)

Colleagues 1, 2, 3, 4, 9 & 10 echoed the 'conveyor belt' mentioned by University of Gloucestershire staff M, O and R; 1, 2, 3, 8 and 10 described guest lectures as their way in. 1 believed it refreshed practice and enabled further study. No.2 'started as a technician after my BA and was then encouraged to apply for an MA that led to a PhD. I was offered Associate Lecturer hours during PhD and found my place in the world. I love the balance of teaching and research that my current post offers.' In particular, this would seem to tie in with Bandura's contention (1998: 95) that 'striving for meaning, predictability, and control over life circumstances permeates most everything people do'.

Colleague 4 highlights the 'accidental academic' in that she 'fell in to it because I was encouraged to do a PhD. My PhD money ran out, so I got an actual job…I am not really someone who would fit well into anything other than a University to be honest'. 8 also exemplified the 'accidental academic', whose master's degree supervisor said – ''fancy doing a funded PhD?' and I thought 'well if I don't like it, I'll just quit'.' Number 6 repeated this entry route.

Nos. 1, 3, 5 & 8 moved from practice, via guest lectures, to part, and then full-time lecturing. Number 5 incorporated teaching alongside freelancing: This 'was less to do with the money… and more to do with my enjoying teaching and a vague desire to put something back into the profession'. As the freelance work dried up academic

duties took their place. No.6 turned to full-time academic work following redundancy. 7 emphasised fascination with their research area and wanted 'to share some of the excitement about it with students!'

Conclusions

The literature and colleague testimonies paint a consistent picture. First, a number expressed the view that they had stepped onto a 'conveyor belt' that led from positive undergraduate experience, to postgraduate study, to guest and part time teaching, eventually to an academic post. By contrast, quite a few commented that a range of 'push' factors – such as long hours and bureaucracy – had moved them from other jobs, to an academic position. Then there was a group that believed they were 'accidental academics'; that is, they either didn't recognise themselves as part of the academy, or have found themselves in lecturing jobs by chance rather than design. A fourth group was drawn to academia on account of perceived or actual flexibility in terms of childcare, hours and ability to pursue individual research interests. And then there were those that cite variations on enjoyment of teaching and empowering young minds. These groupings tie in with literature, for example Bothale (Quora online) notes the draw of comfortable working hours; researching issues that interest and love of teaching.

It has to be said, however, that such positive perceptions – which brought staff into academia – are not borne out by a *2016 University Workplace Survey* of 1,398 UK academic respondents, with 40% feeling insecure in their jobs; with 'excessive hours worked by academics…once again highlighted as a major problem'; and just 4 out of 10 academics commented that they were happy with the working conditions and other benefits offered by their university. In summary, the quality of academic life entered into, is shown to be under strain. And as Hay (2017: 5) notes, in order to flourish academics should embrace both 'a range of objective (e.g. research productivity, teaching performance, salary) and subjective markers (e.g. life satisfaction, freedom, influencing students).'

The research findings in this article also present a strong case for alignment and mutual reinforcement of higher education teaching and approaches to community engagement. The one nurtures the other. I offer three key recommendations as to how the two may be combined to good effect. First, university and community organisation senior managers should devolve decision-making to the lowest appropriate level; with finance following function. Trust teaching academics and their students, plus frontline community development workers, to implement and fund decisions that they are directly affected by. As a well-known community development dictum goes, 'If you want to know how the shoe fits, ask the person wearing it, not the one who made it.'

The second recommendation is directed at collections of staff. As the 14th Dalai Lama has argued, humans 'are social beings. We come into the world as the result of others' actions. We survive here in dependence on others. Whether we like it or not, there is hardly a moment of our lives when we do not benefit from others' activities. For this reason, it is hardly surprising that most of our happiness arises in the context

of our relationships with others.' Let us therefore celebrate and enact a life in common, where the whole exceeds the sum of the parts; and in which research and teaching collaborations are rewarded and celebrated, rather than deemed a poor relation to individual excellence.

The third recommendation targets academics and community development staff in showing what we can do immediately. In the words of philosopher of science, JD Bernal 'the scientist is citizen first, scientist second'. Meaning that – whether engaged in academia or community engagement – we are to greater or lesser extent free agents in working for ourselves and each other, by using our skills and knowledge in both our personal and professional lives.

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